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ABSTRACT

A study investigated what basic writers think they are doing when they write and whether those perceptions are related to their writing achievement. A total of 134 students, high school seniors in a program of extra academic help and college freshmen in a compensatory composition course, completed a questionnaire that elicited data about their current and previous writing courses and grades, as well as their estimate of their writing ability. Students were then asked to follow specific instructions while composing an essay. Each paper was rated by two scorers, and the ideas students expressed about the writing process and piece of writing itself were grouped under the headings of prewriting, writing, and postwriting. A computer analysis of the relationships among the kinds of data assembled indicated a clear statistical relationship between grade level and grade earned--as grade level rose, marks fell. Similarly, students' estimates of their writing ability fell as they advanced. The results also indicated a significant relationship between the students' estimates of their writing ability and their grades in English, but no such relationship was found between their estimates and their scores on the writing sample. Success was related to growth and elaboration of ideas during writing and to high level postwriting activities. Discovering while writing was the only process with a significant positive relationship to both grade and essay score. (HTH)

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BASIC WRITERS PERCEIVE THE PROCESS OF COMPOSING

A Paper Delivered at the CCCC, San Francisco, California, March 19, 1982, by

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BASIC WRITERS PERCEIVE THE PROCESS OF COMPOSING

The purpose of this study in how basic writers perceive the composing process is to investigate what our students think they are doing when they write and to see whether those perceptions are related to their achievement as writers. The study is based on a group of students in the twelfth grade of high school and in the two semesters of a college freshman writing program.

The high school students were seniors in an inner-city public high school in the Bronx, New York, who were in a program which provided extra help in academic subjects to enable them to continue their educations at four-year colleges. Successful graduates of the program are guaranteed placement in a senior college of City University of New York. None of the college students in the study were graduates of the program. Although the highest achieving students in that high school were included in the program, the demography of the region and the lure of five or six local high school with stronger academic reputations kept traditionally academically motivated students away. And despite their participation in the program, they were still beginners, students whose writing (according to Mina Shaughnessy) could stun college teachers not accustomed to reading their work. More objectively, they ranged in reading grade (by graduation) from eighth through twelfth grade, averaging two or three years below grade level. Since the writing samples were taken early in the school year, some of the students may have been below this range.

The first-semester college students were in a course labelled "compensatory." They had either failed to pass a first semester composition course or had been placed on the basis of the CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test, on which they showed the following abilities, but on a low level:

The writer introduces some point or idea and demonstrates an awareness that development or illustration is called for.

The essay presents a discernible pattern of organization, even if there are occasional digressions.

The essay demonstrates sufficient command of vocabulary to convey, without serious distortion or excessive simplification, the range of the writer's ideas.

Sentences reflect a sufficient command of syntax to ensure reasonable clarity of expression. The writer generally avoids both the monotony of rudimentary syntax and the incoherence created by tangled syntax.

The writer demonstrates through punctuation an understanding of the boundaries of the sentence.

The writer spells the common words of the language with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Exceptions can be made for the so-called spelling "demons" which frequently trouble even an advanced writer.

The writer shows the ability to use regulary, but not necessarily faultlessly, the common forms of agreement and of grammatical inflection in standard written English.

The second-semester students had completed a compensatory course, or had completed a standard first-semester course with a grade of "C," or had failed to complete a second-semester course on a previous attempt.

The 134 students gave the following information on a questionnaire. In both the questionnaire and the writing sample, students were identified by number only:

DATA FROM QUESTIONNAIRES

	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
CURRENT WRITING COURSE		
High School English 12	51	38
First Semester College (Compensatory Course)	45	34
Second Semester College	38	28
LAST WRITING COURSE		
High School English 11	52	38
High School English 12	10	8
College Remedial	16	12
First Semester College (Compensatory)	28	21
First Semester College	11	8
Second Semester College	7	5
Other	10	8
GRADE (OR EQUIVALENT) IN LAST COURSE		
A	12	9
B	51	38
C	37	28
D	4	3
F	21	15
INC	5	4

	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
STUDENT ESTIMATE OF WRITING ABILITY		
Excellent	4	3
Good	43	32
Average	77	58
Poor	10	8
Very Poor	0	0
AGE		
17 and under	45	34
18-20	56	42
21-24	14	10
25-29	11	8
30 and over	6	4
Range: 16-52		
SEX		
Male	44	33
Female	89	66
NATIVE LANGUAGE		
English	85	63
Spanish	45	34
Other	3	2
LANGUAGE STUDENT SPEAKS AT HOME		
English	88	66
Spanish	43	32
Other	3	2

One of the college students had either not taken a twelfth-grade English course or did not consider that course to have been in "writing."

There was a clear statistical relation between grade level and grade earned: as grade level rose, marks fell. High school students reported an average English grade between "B" and "C"; college students reported a low "C." Similarly, the students' estimates of their writing ability fell as they advanced, although the students who were repeating the second-semester college course all rated themselves "average."

In their regular classes, the students were asked to perform the following tasks, either by Mrs. Domenica Paterno of Herbert H. Lehman College or by me. This is the "script" we kept before us:

> 1. Remember being in the subway. Think about that experience for a few minutes. You will have ten minutes to write a piece based on that experience.
> 2. Think back to the beginning of this assignment. What processes did you go through in thinking about the assignment and in actually doing it?
> 3. Read this piece. (A brilliantly styled short essay by Tom Wolfe, "The Subway.") You may look up or ask about anythin in it you do not understand.
> 4. You have ten minutes to answer the question, "How is this writing different from your writing?" Try to get you ideas down even if you are not sure you are expressing yourself correctly. What we need are your ideas.
> 5. You have five minutes to answer the question, "Remember producing your writing. What processes do you think Wolfe used to produce his?

While one or two students wrote notes refusing to participate, most were cooperative and made what seemed to be serious efforts to follow our instructions.

The subway compositions were rated by a group of pre- and in-service English teachers in one of my classes whom I had trained to use the following scoring guide:

RATING SCALE

	Low 1	Average 2	High 3
General Characteristics:			
Purpose			
Audience			
Point of View			
Tone			
Organization			
Development			
Detail			
Content			
Mechanical Characteristics:			
Wording			
Vocabulary			
Syntax			
Usage			
Punctuation			

Each paper was rated by two scorers. In case of a difference of more than one point on a characteristic, a third reader was employed.

Charles R. Cooper makes the following statement about the reliability of holistic judgments:

> When raters are from similar backgrounds and when they are trained with a holistic scoring guide--either one they borrow or devise for themselves on the spot--they can achieve nearly perfect agreement in choosing the better of a pair of essays; and they can achieve scoring reliabilities in the high eighties and low nineties on their summed scores from multiple pieces of a student's writing.

A characteristic of the raters was that they scored students lower in the privacy of the actual rating session than in the training sessions: the idea of "average for this groups of papers" fell before the great god STANDARDS. Since scores are comparitive only, this had no effect.

Scores were computed by adding together the subscores, giving double value to the "general" subscores, and adding the totals of the two raters of each composition. (The terms "general" and "mechanical" did not appear on the scales themselves.) The characteristics are self-explanatory except for content, which was to what degree the writer was saying something, and wording, which referred to the appropriateness with which the vocabulary was used. Turgid writing exhibiting an extensive vocabulary could be rated low on wording, high on vocabulary.

Mrs. Paterno and I then read the three papers each student had written on writing, classifying and tabulating their responses. Since the terms in the summary were derived from the students' writing and were used for our convenience only (and as labels in the computer), they had no effect on the results. We looked for ideas, not for specific language.

The ideas expressed about the writing process are grouped under the headings of prewriting, writing, and postwriting only to indicate that students referred to what was done before, during, and after writing the draft.

PERCEPTION OF THE WRITING PROCESS

	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
PREWRITING	**116**	**87**
Observing, notetaking	80	60
Thinking	66	49
Organizing	45	33
Considering	36	27
Time	26	19
Outlining	13	10
WRITING	**126**	**94**
Remembering	80	60
Thinking	68	51
Visualizing	51	38
Time	30	22
Discovering	25	19
POSTWRITING	**17**	**13**
Proofreading	10	8
Revising	9	7
Rewriting	5	4
Editing	4	3

Range of items mentioned by individuals: 0 through 11 (15 possible).

Average: 3-4.

Under "prewriting," thinking refers to comments like "I thought about the subway," while considering refers to "I had to think it through." Time indicates comments about Wolfe's having days to ride the subway, or about the time limit on writing. Under "Writing," thinking always refers to the first level, not the level of considering, even when the students referred to Wolfe.

Even considering that there was no reference to postwriting activities in the instructions, it is surprising how few students mentioned it, either to complain that there was no time to proofread or edit or to comment on the polishing that Wolfe's piece must have gone through.

The last type of data produced by the study is a list of the characteristics mentioned by the students about the pieces of writing themselves. We looked for the characteristics included on the rating scale and added the others that appeared in the students' writing:

PERCEPTION OF CHARACTERISTICS

	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
DETAIL	91	68
POINT OF VIEW	46	34
CONTENT	45	33
DEVELOPMENT	43	32
ORGANIZATION	43	32
STYLE	31	23
AUDIENCE	30	22
LENGTH	29	21
PURPOSE	29	21
TONE	27	20
CLARITY	22	16
VOCABULARY	17	13
CORRECTNESS	14	10
WORDING	12	9
SYNTAX	7	5
PUNCTUATION	7	5
USAGE	3	2

Without further analysis, it seems clear that students are taught to be specific and to use concrete detail. We may also speculate that the relative infrequency with which clarity, vocabulary, correctness, wording, syntax, punctuation, and usage appear reflects the inability of basic writers to distinguish the clear from the turgid, the correct from the incorrect, the mot juste from just any word.

The meat of the study is in the computer analysis of the relationships among the kinds of data assembled. The first finding is that while there is a significant ($p=.001$, $r=.27$) relationship between their estimates of their writing ability and their grades in English, there is no such relationship between their estimates and their scores on the subway writing. There is a relationship, but it is not linear: four times as many students whose scores were in the top third rated themselves as poor writers as did students with lower scores. This indicates that two different aspects of writing are measured by these scores and by English teachers: teachers grade students based on their finished products--polished, rewritten, at least corrected--and on their ability to create, after preliminary drafts and perhaps with their instructors' help, papers of a particular academic type. The subway writing scores reflect the students' attempts to get something into form by transcribing, in effect, the "inner voice" which James Moffett suggests is central to both reading and writing. "I write the way I talk," says the basic writer apologetically. That is, they draw upon the same inner generation of language forms; they do not "think writing." (Those of us who are novices at dictating letters know how difficult it is to "talk writing"; listening to lectures teaches us how difficult it is to "write talking.") Basic writers are beginners because they do not think writing. In our classes, they tend to learn to

convert their writing into the measured, impersonal exposition which is the freshman English ideal. That conversion occurs first in rewriting, later in the initial generation of prose. If this analysis is correct, a study similar to this one with accomplished student writers should show a far closer relationship between grade and score. Support for this idea can be found in the relationships analyzed in this study.

When scores on the subway writing are compared to the processes mentioned by the students, analysis using a T-Test shows that prewrite (whether or not the student mentioned prewriting at all), thinking as a prewriting activity, considering, and discovering while writing all showed a significant relationship to a rise in score. (Throughout, the level of significance is .05 or lower.)

The T-Test treats each item individually; multiple regression analyzes the effect of each item on the score when all the items are considered simultaneously. The results of analysis through multiple regression show that considering is related to a 5% rise in score, writing (any mention) to a 3% rise, and prewriting (any mention) and discovering to a 1% rise each. (Smaller relationships were not considered, nor was the possibility of negative relationships.) Of postwriting processes, only editing showed a relationship to as much as a 1% rise in score. Postwriting as a whole showed no such relationship.

PERCEPTION OF PROCESS RELATED TO SCORE

T-TEST

PROCESS	RISE IN MEAN SCORE
PREWRITING (ANY MENTION)	8.3
SPECIFIC PREWRITING PROCESSES:	
CONSIDERING	8.5
THINKING	5.1
SPECIFIC WRITING PROCESSES:	
DISCOVERING	5.5

RANGE OF SCORES: 44-122

MEAN SCORE: 77.09

MEDIAN SCORE: 79

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

PROCESS	PERCENTAGE OF SCORE PREDICTED
PREWRITING (ANY MENTION)	1%
SPECIFIC PREWRITING PROCESSES:	
CONSIDERING	5%
WRITING (ANY MENTION)	3%*
SPECIFIC WRITING PROCESSES:	
DISCOVERING	1%
SPECIFIC POSTWRITING PROCESSES:	
EDITING	1%*

*Distribution of scores not significant on T-Test.

The processes showing a relationship to a rise in score on both tests are prewriting (any mention), considering, and discovering while writing. Coupled with the fact that none of the characteristics of writing mentioned (e.g. style) shows a significant relationship to score, it seems clear that the score on the writing sample is related to the students' ability to express their thoughts in "their own" language. But even that is composed of learned activities, just as the score is made up of subscores on the rating sheet. Here are the significant relationships between the mention of a process and the rise of a subscore, which may be visualized as a grade-point average in which a difference on one is equivalent to a full grade's difference, and a .3 is equivalent to a plus or minus. (Smaller relationships are not considered.)

PERCEPTION OF PROCESS RELATED TO SUBSCORES

PROCESS	SUBSCORE AREA	CHANGE
PREWRITING (ANY MENTION)	PURPOSE	.6
	AUDIENCE	.6
	PUNCTUATION	.5
SPECIFIC PREWRITING PROCESSES:		
CONSIDERING	DEVELOPMENT	.8
	ORGANIZATION	.7
	AUDIENCE	.5
	DETAIL	.5
	WORDING	.5
	SYNTAX	.5
	VOCABULARY	.4
	PUNCTUATION	.4
THINKING	PURPOSE	.5
	SYNTAX	.4
	AUDIENCE	.3
	DEVELOPMENT	.3
	PUNCTUATION	.3
ORGANIZING	DEVELOPMENT	.4
OUTLINING	ORGANIZATION	.6
WRITING (ANY MENTION)	DEVELOPMENT	.7
SPECIFIC WRITING PROCESSES:		
VISUALIZING	DETAIL	.5
	ORGANIZATION	.4
	DEVELOPMENT	.4
	CONTENT	.3
DISCOVERING	PURPOSE	.4
	AUDIENCE	.4
	USAGE	.3

PROCESS	SUBSCORE AREA	CHANGE
SPECIFIC POSTWRITING PROCESSES:		
EDITING	PUNCTUATION	1.3
	DEVELOPMENT	1.1
	WORDING	1.0
	SYNTAX	1.0
	USAGE	.7
PROOFREADING	USAGE	.5

The strength of the relationships under editing must be viewed with the understanding that no causal relationship is proved. Those who performed better--even on first draft--in those areas open to editing mentioned editing. The lesser relationship to proofreading may reflect hierarchical thinking on the part of the students, who, in mentioning editing, considered proofreading included.

The many strengths of the students mentioning "considering" are an indication of basic writers who understand that writing is a form of conceptualizing, not merely a performance. The "neatest" relationship is between visualizing and detail, which appeals directly to common sense.

Other relationships to score include native and spoken language, which relate to wording but not to vocabulary, and age, which related strongly to wording and vocabulary, and also to organization, development, and syntax.

The relationships to the students' grades in their last English class are less complex:

PERCEPTIONS OF PROCESS RELATED TO GRADE EARNED

PROCESS	CHANGE
SPECIFIC WRITING PROCESSES:	
REMEMBERING	.6
DISCOVERING	.5
SPECIFIC POSTWRITING PROCESSES:	
REVISING	.9
REWRITING	.5

Here, success seems related to growth and elaboration of ideas during writing itself, and to high-level postwriting activities. It is most interesting that considering does not appear at all positively related to grades earned and that discovering while writing is the only process with a significant positive relationship to both grade and score. Visualizing shows a strong relationship to grades, but not a linear one: the "average" student who mentioned it earned a "C"; those who did not, a "B." But students who mentioned visualizing were three times as likely to have earned "A's" as those who did not and only half as likely to have failed. Comments about artistic characteristics and visual versus linguistic strengths spring to mind, but are wholly speculative.

But what happened to considering? Do we begin with basic writers who, when they write well, succeed on the basis of the strength of the ideas they begin with, and end with writers who succeed on the basis of the growth of their ideas as they write and the understanding of rewriting and revision as inseparable from writing? As appealing as that idea might seem, does it imply that as basic writers improve, they become less concerned with having something to say and more concerned about "how to write 500 words about nothing"(as Paul Roberts once suggested) so long as they say it correctly and in appropriate academic language?

The interpretation I am sure we would all prefer is that the most academically successful of our basic writers--not fully fledged, but fledglings--are conscious of practicing the discipline they need to learn in a transitional period after which they will have a trained "inner voice" to draw upon. Then, no longer basic writers, they will be able to go back to writing which expresses their considered thoughts, elaborate those thoughts as they write, and revise, rewrite, edit first drafts written in what will then be their "natural" language.

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